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ABSTRACT

This digest is intended to help and inform those teachers who are contemplating using children's literature to teach reading, and provides a brief review of material in the ERIC database on literature-based reading instruction. The digest includes sections on recent research, basic resources, assessing literature based reading, diverse methods approaches, and practical teaching guides. (NKA)

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Using Literature to Teach Reading

by Nola Kortner Aiex

The National Reading Initiative, an outgrowth of the California Reading Initiative, is a coordinating and disseminating network formed to promote reading and reduce illiteracy. Its members believe that literacy can be promoted by developing children's joy in stories and by instilling in youngsters an early love of literature through positive contact with books [Cullinan, EJ 386 980].

Through the use of children's literature in a school reading program, youngsters can enter the world of literature while they learn to read. Works of literature can have an integral place in the earliest stages of a reading program through a teacher's practice of reading aloud [Higgins, ED 273 933]. Some language arts specialists hold that real stories and real characters are better vehicles for teaching reading comprehension than the basal readers and accompanying workbooks [Smith-Burke, ED 280 080]. At the very least, real literature could be substituted sometimes for the excerpts found in basal readers.

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Recent research

Tunnell and Jacobs [EJ 385 147] review the findings of several recent studies which support the success of a literature-based approach to literacy for various types of students, including limited English speakers, developmental readers, and remedial readers, as well as ordinary readers. They describe common elements found in different literature based programs, such as the use of natural text, reading aloud, and sustained silent reading.

Basic resources in primary grades

Even young children can be involved in activities that establish positive attitudes toward reading and that pave the way for the use of children's literature as a medium for reading instruction. In the first weeks of kindergarten, many teachers use books to stimulate language development in children. Wordless books, such as Tomie dePaola's *Pancakes for Breakfast* and Turkle's *Deep in the Forest* are favorites of young children because they can enjoy following the plot without straining to decode words, and because such books free a child's imagination to interpret the author's ideas in her/his own way.

Many wordless books use a repeated pattern or a rhyme. *The Haunted House* (Bill Martin, Jr.) uses the repetition "I tiptoed...No one was there." Children can delight in chanting the repeated structure while tiptoeing around the room or pantomiming other ways to move [Sampson, ED 236 534]. Children can also make personal versions of book illustrations in watercolor, paint, or collage, for example, or use a storyboard and flannel figures to tell a beloved story in their own words.

A second grade teacher in a rural Appalachian school supplements the required basal readings

with familiar regional literature to teach reading to her students. The children also write their own regional stories. She finds that motivation is high with this approach, unlike the low motivation which accompanies the purely basal reader approach [Oxendine, ED 306 549].

Classroom teachers who wish to use literature for reading instruction but are apprehensive because of lack of knowledge about children's books can work closely with the school librarian or with the children's librarian at the public library [Hanzl, EJ 335 657]. A well stocked reading corner in the classroom gives children the opportunity to read a book more than once—along with the option of sometimes reading a book with no academic followup activities. Teachers themselves should read as many of the books in the reading corner as possible to become familiar with the material and to allow the children to observe and imitate their behavior [Newcastle and Ward, ED 260 377].

Assessing literature based reading

How can teachers monitor a student's progress in literature based programs without skill workbooks or tests to grade? Children can write a short paragraph about a book they liked (or did not like). Teachers can develop checklists to fill out as they listen to children read. Teachers can observe whether the students (1) show interest in words, (2) can tell a familiar story, (3) can point to individual words on a page, (4) turn the pages at the appropriate time when a story is being read aloud, (5) can find a familiar book on a shelf, (6) choose to read a book or to write during free time, (7) notice words and symbols in the classroom setting, (8) spell words developmentally, (9) ask questions about print, and (10) are aware that print has meaning. Teachers should become continuous observers who monitor the child's interaction with materials in the child's educational environment.

Most parents will accept a teacher's observation that a child is making progress in reading, even without the reinforcement of test results. And a child who is an enthusiastic reader by the end of the 3rd grade will continue to develop competence in the upper elementary grades [Lamme, ED 281 151].

Basal reading programs have been criticized for being on too literal a level and for their skill-oriented nature. When children in basal-dominated programs reach the 4th grade, they often confront reading for the first time as a task that goes beyond the oral language background that has served them through the lower primary grades. Students are moved at this point into the literary tradition with vocabulary and content that outstrips what they know. They also come into contact with content area reading as science and social studies become individual disciplines separate from language arts.

Students accustomed to reading widely in nonbasal materials, however, are less perplexed by narratives of increased complexity. They have established an important connection: what reading class is really all about is reading books [Higgins, ED 273 933]. They have received instruction in reading strategies that address the growing difficulty and length of books. They have been reading in the wealth of children's literature that admirably addresses content area topics. A skillful teacher can use literature to teach the same skills that are presented in the basal readers. Children can be taught to use their background knowledge, to analyze, and to monitor their own strategies for comprehension.

Whole language and guided reading approaches

For middle level students, Cummings [ED 281 207], an elementary school teacher himself, recommends the whole language approach for the development of reading skills. His grade or class exemplifies a highly integrated literature based approach to reading. The students choose a theme, divide into groups of 3 to 5 students, select the titles they intend to read, and work out a time frame for reading. Each student keeps a reading journal to copy favorite passages and makes discussion notes dealing with literary concepts such as foreshadowing, characterization, or plot development. Orally, teacher and pupils compare and contrast plots and characters, discuss imaginative uses of language, consider the author's technique and style, examine illustrations, and make story predictions.

An essay is usually expected of the students. Both rough drafts and the revised copies are written in the journals. Literature provides examples of good writing, and much time is spent learning to write short stories. The final component of Cummings' unit establishes closure of the theme

with a day of sharing reading experiences. The whole class engages in activities such as dramatic interpretation, sharing creative art projects, book talks, tape recordings, or anything else that the class can think of [Cummings, ED 281 207].

Gary and Scott Poole [ED 273 936] use novels in guided reading instruction for teaching reading comprehension to upper level elementary school students. This method means more preparation time for the teacher, who must read the book, study the vocabulary, and compose study questions. But they consider the rewards of an interested, excited class worth the extra trouble. The Pooles build background for each chapter, present the new vocabulary, and assign the chapter to be read silently. Then the chapter is either analyzed in class discussion, or the students are given questions to be answered in writing.

Teaching guides

Several teachers' guides that focus on using literature in the reading program in the elementary grades are compiled by McClain [ED 260 381] and Hepler [EJ 374 854]. McClain emphasizes critical reading skills, while Hepler advocates teacher-developed guides. Her criterion is that a good guide should improve the quality of the reader's experience with the book—it should permit readers to examine their own responses and some of the reasons behind them.

As children grow and develop, the refining of the basic skills that make up the language arts--listening, speaking, reading, and writing—is accomplished more easily in an environment that offers the varied language experiences that come with literature. Such a program requires a teacher who is enthusiastic about using real books, knowledgeable about what kind of materials are available, and eager to help students develop interest and enthusiasm in reading.

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